



The Way to Make a Future: A Conversation with Glauber Rocha

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GORDON HITCHENS

The Way to Make a Future

A CONVERSATION WITH GLAUBER ROCHA

Rocha was in New York recently for the opening of Antonio das Mortes (Grove Press Films) and discussed with Gordon Hitchens the analysis of his film which appeared in FILM QUARTERLY, Winter 1969-70 ("Comparative Anatomy of Folk-Myth Films: Robin Hood and Antonio das Mortes"). This article argued that, far from being a revolutionary film, Antonio das Mortes was in fact "Wagnerian, romantic, and philosophically idealist" and "formulated the antagonism between oppressors and oppressed in a symbolic and static way, rather than in a process-oriented material way." In the following comments, Rocha rebuts this view in a spirit of friendly debate, and explains his viewpoint as he feels it is manifested in the film. His remarks have been translated by Elliott Stein and edited by Gordon Hitchens.

Although *Black God, White Devil* is, of all my feature films, the one which has had the most critical success until now, for me *Terra em Transe*, made in 1966 in Rio de Janeiro, is my most important film, in which I deal with politics and political reality in South America in the most contemporary way. For me, it is my most significant film to date.

I find that the Ernest Callenbach study of *Antonio das Mortes* in *Film Quarterly* is intelligently written but I myself am not in the least in agreement with Lucaszian and Gramscian Marxist philosophy. I find that Callenbach has

used the way of thinking found in the work of Lucasz and Gramsci to analyze my film, and I find that this way of thinking by Callenbach is a rather oversimplified way of looking at realities outmoded today, and I find that it is basically idealistic rather than dialectic.

This analysis by Callenbach I find to be academic in method, rather than having to do with contemporary reality—although it's interesting as a theory. Antonio was created—the character in the film of *Antonio das Mortes*—was created for completely different reasons, not for the reasons expressed in Callenbach's article.

Antonio, the figure Antonio, may be symbolic, but he emerges directly out of the previous film, out of *Black God, White Devil*. The film-going public liked the character of Antonio. The character was very popular. The social problems dealt with in the picture had not been done away with, it was still contemporary. I wanted to make another film about the Northeast of Brazil, a contemporary film taking place in the psychology and the reality of the 1960's.

Note re Roche's *Black God, White Devil*: In FQ's review (Winter 1969-70) it was mistakenly reported that a truncated version was to be distributed in the U.S. New arrangements have been made, with New Yorker Films, and a version prepared by Rocha himself will be available. Rocha also points out that, though Allan Francovich meant to praise him by noting that his political rights had been rescinded by the Brazilian regime because of his films, in fact he was jailed (for two weeks) because of political activity, not film work; and his political rights were never rescinded.

As far as the problems evoked in Callenbach's article—about the role of the army in a revolutionary context, and seeing Antonio as a symbol of a possible turning, a possible shift in the army or the police in different countries, whether it's Brazil or elsewhere, turning against the power whose interests it is protecting, to go over to the side of the people who are being oppressed, in a rather Robin Hood way—it is true that in certain countries, in Peru and Bolivia and Colombia, it has been noted by several students of the current political situation in South America, by writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marques in Colombia. In Peru, it is evident that changes are taking place in the ideology of the military caste, which until recently was the traditional upholder of rightists and reactionaries. But the Peruvian military now takes a more liberal stand, especially on questions of foreign policy. In Bolivia, for instance, it's the very same people who killed Che Guevara who now are taking rather leftist positions, in terms of the political realities of their own countries.

But the conflict in Antonio, the conflict in my film, does not have these direct symbolic overtones in terms of international politics. They are conflicts along the lines of professional and moral obligations that get their possessor into trouble. Antonio, in my film, reverses his own past, he goes against the man he once was, against the class which he has served in the past, to create his own future. His only way to make a future is to cut himself off from the alliances he had in the past. The question of whether or not Antonio has read Marx, has understood Marx or not, is totally gratuitous in the context of my film.

Antonio's change is a profoundly personal and mystical change. It is not abstract. The mysticism in my film is a part of everyday reality, a part of the people in the Northeast of Brazil whose everyday realities, whose everyday way of life, is involved in mysticism. Antonio is a primitive person. He could not have Marxist views on the world because he is a primitive person who has not had such an education. The true revolutionaries in South Amer-

ica are individuals, suffering personalities, who are not involved in theoretical problems. Latin American peasants have not read Marx. The intellectuals, the literate intellectuals in the big cities who have read Marx and who have been aware of all the different currents and ideologies of modern history and world events, they can influence these Latin American peasants, but the provocation to violence, the contact with everyday bitter reality that may eventually produce violent change in South America, this upheaval can come only from individual people who have suffered themselves and who have realized that a need for change is present—not for theoretical reasons but because of personal agony.

At the end of my film, Antonio says to the professor, "I fight for moral reasons!" And these moral reasons are personal, not Marxist. Any attempt to identify Antonio with a Marxist dialectic is doomed to failure because the film was not conceived, on any level, in this context.

The professor in *Antonio das Mortes* is symbolic of the left-wing intellectual from a middle-class background who is capable of liberating himself from the vices of his background. He can liberate himself for political activity, which would free himself from his background. He is the liberal middle-class intellectual with a Marxist intellectual background. Perhaps he serves only as a kind of auxiliary to the Antonios, who are the individuals.

There is a scene in the film when they're in the car and there's some music in the background and the words to the song are "Shake off the dust, rise up and liberate yourself." This, to a certain extent, is the sort of advice that this left-wing intellectual from a middle-class background is taking, or that it is necessary for him to take. He is shaking off his past. He is freeing himself from the dust of his bourgeois way of thinking. Thus he is able to become effective in the struggle for the people. The professor is typical of a person who must pass, must go from irony and skepticism to action, must move over to action. For me, any careful attention paid to *Antonio das Mortes*



Glauber Rocha (left) directs a scene in CABEZAS CORTADAS, with Francisco Cabal (center) and Pierre Clementi (right). The film was shot in Spain.

will reveal this, because it is not just in the action, but the message is reinforced by the words of the song.

What do I think of Callenbach's interpretation of *Antonio das Mortes* in which Callenbach says that, according to him, young American radicals who embrace *Antonio* as a revolutionary film are wide of the mark? He, Callenbach, sees in my film despair and gloom and a lack in interest in actual political processes. According to Callenbach, my films are not about politics but about the punishment of symbolic father-figures. Although Callenbach's article is extremely intelligent, his basically Lucacsian point of view, his critical attitude, recall an old-fashioned intellectual way of dealing with reality. He takes as his point of departure a catalogue of philosophical views which then interprets works of art—whether it's

a film or a work of literature—and then sticks them into these pigeon-holes.

When Callenbach speaks of the South American reality he is talking about a situation that he doesn't know very well. The reality in my films is close to despair perhaps—but it is true that Latin American reality is not theoretical but tragic. The situation down there is tragic and it can't be dealt with, *it can't* be dealt with, even in a fictional film, in terms of standard Marxian theory. The attitude of Callenbach—interpreting the mode of dealing with father-figures in my films and speaking of them in terms of punishment of symbolic father-figures, is a kind of false Freudianism.

The father-figure in my films is power. South American dictatorship has been traditionally,

not only in Brazil but elsewhere, paternal. And to this extent some of my characters may be considered as father-figures, but not in any Freudian way. These are political paternalists, demagogic figures, who have posed traditionally in political terms as messiahs. And any revenge that my characters take upon them, any punishment of these symbolic father-figures, has not been due to any personal existential revenge on my part against any supposed father-figures. Instead, these are *political* actions, not personal actions. My films are not existential films but social-political films of analysis. These father-figures are conceived only in political terms. This entire Freudian analysis of my films is completely beside the point.

In *Antonio*, there is a strong admixture of traditional religious symbols, used in a current contemporary political context. To understand this, one must realize that all of Latin America is marked by mysticism. Above all in Brazil, there is a very strange mixture of Christianity and African religions. It is a very complex situation. The popular culture, the popular music, the popular theater in Brazil—all are based on an emotional Dionysiac behavior, which comes from this mixture of traditional Christianity, especially Catholic Christianity, and these African religions. This mixture is more emotional than critical. There are faults and qualities, good points and bad points, involved in such a situation, especially that involving the alienation of the people from everyday reality. But the energy—which is found in the people—this energy will eventually resist oppression. It draws its sources from this mysticism, which results from this fusion of religions all over Latin America.

Current-day artists in all the arts, not only in films—by attempting to psychoanalyze the people to find the sources of their energy, and by attempting to channel these sources as artistic means, and to analyze their true characteristics—are faced with this problem. Because the psychic states of these people are influenced by this admixture, which is also called syncretism, in which elements from Africa and from the Christian and western religions

are mixed. This relationship, this background, this symbolic background is at the heart of my film. It's the veritable discourse of my film, of *Antonio das Mortes*.

I could not treat my characters in any sort of western traditional Freudian way as is known in Europe and America, because this would be false to their reality. This Afro-Catholic element is at the basis of their behavior. Traditionally, St. George in Brazil is the warrior who struggles against the dragon, who frees the people. He is the veritable saint. He is the saint with whom the people identify. He is the sacred warrior who defends the people from oppression. All over Brazil you find pictures, in the most humble of homes, in the highest dwellings, of St. George struggling against the dragon. It is perhaps no accident, it is a very striking fact noted all over the world, when the current political situation in Brazil is reported, the avant-garde in the political struggle against the governmental oppression in Brazil has been coming from the new Catholic Church, from liberal people in the Catholic Church who are raising their voices against the government, against political oppression, against the tortures. And they have in turn themselves been persecuted because of this. And all these elements are mixed up in my film. These elements are at the heart of my film.

I think that nowadays, in struggling for a theory of cinema that can be of political value, we must be able to conceive of people all over making films in any form, in any shape, in any manner, in 16mm and in 8mm, in every different way, so that true revolutionary cinema must develop in many different ways all over the world, so that political liberation can take place. This diversity in my recent work is a reflection of this diversity in the revolutionary means of cinema.